

Vintage Radio

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Vintage radio clubs: 15 years old and still going strong

Vintage radio clubs have played a vital role in preserving Australia's radio heritage. Two very active clubs are the Vintage Radio Club of North East Victoria and the HRSA NSW North Coast Group, both of which have now been going for over 15 years.

WHEN IT COMES to our radio heritage, the retention of records and working equipment has, until relatively recently, been rather spasmodic. Many people in the past considered old and/or obsolete equipment as only suitable for the rubbish tip.

Unfortunately, this "throw-it-away"

attitude has robbed Australia of much extremely interesting information on our vintage radio heritage. As a result, some enthusiasts have now realised that this information and the equipment is worth saving and restoring.

For example, on a personal basis, I wanted to know about the history and

development of communications in outback Australia. Both the equipment used in the early days and any associated information was disappearing quickly, so it proved quite a challenge. Fortunately, I was able to obtain help from several people, which enabled me to trace this history with reasonable accuracy.

My efforts proved to be very timely, as two of the people who gave me considerable help have since died, while the remainder are quite elderly. The results of my research appeared in a book entitled "Outback Radio – from Flynn to Satellites", which was reviewed in the January 2005 issue of SILICON CHIP.

Unfortunately, the same attitude of "get rid of the old" has been quite evident when it comes to commercial and domestic radio equipment. However, there were a few individuals who did realise the importance of this gear and began collecting over 30 years ago – well before there were any clubs or groups formed by like-minded people. In my own case, for example, I half-heartedly began collecting WWII military equipment around 1970 and my interest in vintage radio receivers grew from there.

Radio clubs

The idea for an association to band together radio collectors and restorers in Australia came from the late Len Davenport in Alice Springs. However, Len was not in the position to personally start such a group due to his remote location, so Ray Kelly in Melbourne, with help from other like-minded people, started the Historical Radio Society of Australia (HRSA) in April 1982. It subsequently proved



One end of the table . . . a collection of sets, test instruments and publications from a recent display put on by the Vintage Radio Club of NE Victoria.



The other end of the table . . . more sets, test instruments and publications from the Vintage Radio Club of NE Victoria.

very successful – it is so much easier in a club environment, for example, to obtain information, parts and advice for all sorts of projects.

The Historical Radio Society of Australia now boasts a membership of around 1100. And across the Tasman, the New Zealand Vintage Radio Society Inc. has a solid membership of about 350.

Other groups have also since sprung up with the same general interests. In 2004, two of these groups celebrated their 15th year of operation: (1) the Vintage Radio Club of North East Victoria Inc. (centred around Shepparton and Benalla); and (2) the Historical Radio Society of Australia NSW North Coast Group, which is centred around Coffs Harbour.

Vintage radio club

The Vintage Radio Club of North East Victoria was convened in Wangaratta in April 1989. Its first president was Bob Young and its aims were to promote the collection and restoration of radio equipment and to explore the history of radio in general, particularly around the north-east area of Victoria. It currently has about 36 members,

with more than half this number regularly attending meetings.

Every five years, the club holds an informal dinner to discuss previous activities. However when the 15th year celebrations came up, it was decided to hold a more formal gathering. Ken Austin, a local retired broadcaster, gave the club a very informative talk on his career in radio, starting from when he commenced in 1941 at the age of 17. It was a hard job during the war, with each person expected to do a lot of different things with very little assistance or money.

Members also displayed a number of items relating to the various activities during the club's existence. As shown in the photos, there were quite a number of receivers built for the annual "Hellier Award" (see below), with many fine examples of woodworking. Also on show was a rare Pyrox wire recorder, plus interesting advertising literature and books.

The Hellier Award

Named after Les Hellier who established the first licensed country radio station (3WR) in Australia in 1925, the Hellier Award is an (almost) annual

competition to build or restore vintage radio equipment.

By way of background, station 3WR initially operated from Les Hellier's home in Wangaratta, Victoria for about nine months but was not a commercial success. It was subsequently reborn in January 1931 with twin antenna masts dominating the town from Osmotherley's building, on the corner of Reid and Murphy Streets, and a proper studio established in Hellier's Sports Store (also in Murphy street). 3WR ultimately became 3SR at Shepparton on 1260kHz. It's interesting to note that,



Ray Kelly helped found the Historical Radio Society of Australia back in April 1982.



A selection of Hellier Award entries and certificates from recent years (Vintage Radio Club of NE Victoria).



Vintage receivers and replica vintage receivers from the Vintage Radio Club of NE Victoria's 15th anniversary display.



An ancient (and rare) Pyrox wire recorder (Vintage Radio Club of NE Victoria).

during its life, 3WR/3SR appears to be the only station within Australia that has not changed frequency.

Getting back to the award, the competition involves club members either building or restoring some piece of radio equipment, whether it be a test instrument or a receiver. The various entries are then judged and the award given out at the June meeting (see photos).

It's interesting to note that the club has members with a wide variety of skills. Some are very good at restoring timber cabinets, while others have excellent skills with bakelite cabinets. Plastic cabinets are a different story though and no-one claims any special expertise with these!

Other members are quite good at collecting historical information and between them, a good library of technical and historical information is available.

Invariably, quite a few members specialise in the technical side of vintage radio, having been employed in the radio field or electronics for most of their working lives. In fact, the club could not manage without those who have the skill to manufacture bits and pieces that are no longer available.

Monthly newsletter

The club also has a monthly newsletter. Edited by Eric Irvine, it has been important for providing technical information and keeping members interested in the club's activities. Indeed, much of the success of the club can be attributed to the newsletter.

As part of its activities, the club also occasionally displays vintage equipment in conjunction with other groups and the local Benalla library has been the venue for several displays over the years.

HRSA: NSW North Coast

Brian Lackie from Urunga has been involved with vintage radio for many years and was one of the founding members of the HRSA back in 1982. Subsequently, in October 1989, Brian and Ray Kelly convened a meeting with other enthusiasts, resulting in the formation of the North Coast Group of the HRSA.

This group is smaller than the Victorian group, with around 23 members. However, it is very active and often has displays at various venues. Their main meetings are held every two

Photo Gallery: Mullard 40



Released under the Mullard name in 1938, this 4-valve set used an Airzone-manufactured chassis fitted to either a cream or brown Bakelite cabinet. The valve line-up was as follows: 6A7 frequency changer, 6F7 IF/audio amplifier/detector, 42 audio output and an 80 rectifier. Photo: Historical Radio Society of Australia, Inc.

months and generally take the form of a social gathering, often with a barbecue lunch.

As part of its activities, the group is quite active in mounting displays at agricultural shows, shopping centres, life-style shows, motor shows – in fact, anywhere the club believes that they can mount an interesting display.

As a result of these displays, the group has gained members and has often been given some rather rare radio equipment and literature. It's all part

of making sure our heritage doesn't disappear.

Communication is always important if any club is to remain active and it was decided to issue a newsletter every six months back in 1992. It now comes out around every three months.

In addition to their normal meetings, they also have occasional technical meetings, to assist any member who has any problems with restoration projects. This is a valuable part of the group's activities, as only a small

number of members have comprehensive technical knowledge and/or cabinet restoration skills.

Finally, there are several other clubs and groups scattered throughout Australia and New Zealand which cater for vintage radio buffs. In varying degrees, they provide mutual encouragement, assistance with restoration, access to bits and pieces, and collection of historical literature.

It all helps preserve our vintage radio heritage. **SC**